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The Peril of the Princesses: How Gender Stereotypes Affect Young Readers

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A research paper completed for English 4710. This is an advanced undergraduate course focused on the study of a particular genre and its ability to articulate meaning in historical, social, and/or literary contexts. This paper is part of the Children's Literature genre series.

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The Peril of the Princesses: How Gender Stereotypes Affect Young Readers

There are aspects of children's literature that never go out of style even if a text goes out of print. The characters, stories, and morals of children's fairy tales are things that have transcended time and remain relevant even to this day. By embracing the naivety of childhood, fairy tales present lessons of all sorts to children. Fairy tales encapsulate fantasy and encourage imagination among children in ways that are only attainable through this type of literature. The stories of three well-known princesses are told in *Three Fairy Princesses*, written by Caroline Patterson around 1890. It is obvious that this text is a product of the time in which it was written because of the messages it sends to young female readers of fairy tales. The fairy tales present subtle stereotypes that send distinct messages about what women meant to society at the time in terms of their roles and the ideas about gendered. A present-day children's literature scholar, Seth Lerer, offers great insight as to what these stories and specific instances might have meant for girls of the time who were reading this, which is crucial in understanding the overall social impact of these fairy tales. All in all, each princess's tale in this text offers a different view as to what a proper woman should be engaging in, which would ultimately reflect how these texts were understood when they debuted. *Three Fairy Princesses*, along with Seth Lerer's *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*, has a lot to say about the type of gender stereotyping that was common in the 1890's, which ultimately influenced the young children who read these stories.

Three Fairy Princesses opens with the tale of Snow White, who is a natural beauty like no other. Her story has been passed down for ages, but this early version has a few notable differences from that of the Disney version that is so prevalent today. While Snow White is at the dwarves' cottage, she is paid a visit by a peddler, a disguise of the evil Queen, who offers Snow White new laces for her dress. These laces are tied onto Snow White's waist, but done so tightly that it causes her to faint and enter a state of unconsciousness. While this was the Queen's attempt at murdering Snow White, it only temporarily disables her. The laces of a young woman's dress pull the clothing tighter so as to create a more form-fitted and curvaceous waist, which would ultimately enhance Snow White's beauty. It is rather intriguing as to why the Queen would attempt to kill Snow White with a beauty-enhancing technique of the time, which is rather ironic. The envious Queen is attempting to kill Snow White but fails at this attempt. Also, the fact that the Queen consults a mirror to find out who is the "fairest in all of the land" hints at the vanity associated with the Queen's motives for killing Snow White. Vanity is a common feminine trait which is depicted as a negative stereotype in this instance. The vanity depicted here is often associated with femininity, which reflects negatively upon any female character. Because of her female nature, her vanity is something that should not shock the audience but rather emphasize her femininity. The Queen is so focused on killing the fairest one in her kingdom that this brings out her vain thoughts and wrath.

The next murder plot is to kill Snow White with an apple, which was executed successfully by the Queen. The apple itself is a symbol so common in Christian theology that it may be relaying another message to the reader. The story of Adam and Eve revolves around the fate of Eve's eating of the apple, which can transfer to the tale of Snow White. Snow White,

a naïve young woman similar to Eve, was tricked into eating the apple by an evil antagonist. This is a rather intriguing connection to the biblical story because the text is suggesting that women are still naïve creatures with no sense of rationality when it comes to trusting a stranger's suggestion. Seth Lerer mentions in *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* that fairy tales "mark the girl as either dangerous or in danger" (Lerer 231), which is obviously the case in "Snow White." These specific examples of gender stereotyping in "Snow White" are a gateway for a plethora of stereotyping to come in *Three Fairy Princesses*.

Next in *Three Fairy Princesses* is the tale of Sleeping Beauty, which is laced with even more stereotypes of women. When the King and Queen gave birth to their beautiful daughter, the King invited twelve out of the thirteen fairies in the nearby kingdom to become fairy godmothers to his baby. The fairy that was uninvited began to feel left out and became furious at this. It is tradition for the fairies to present gifts to the baby, and just when the twelfth was about to present her gift, the thirteenth fairy stormed into the castle. She bestowed a punishment on the baby and cried, "When the princess is fifteen years old, she shall prick herself with a spindle, and fall down dead" (Patterson 21). The twelfth fairy then stated her gift would be that the princess would prick herself with the spindle but would sleep for one hundred years. This instance is rather captivating in itself because the "good" fairy does not eliminate the "evil" fairy's death wish but rather amends it to put the princess into a deep slumber. Ultimately, evil trumps good in this circumstance because the princess will still have to suffer.

To ease the mind of the King and Queen, the kingdom is ordered to burn all of the spindles to prevent this horrible thing from happening to their daughter. After wandering around her castle one day, she follows a turret-style staircase and stumbles upon an old woman spinning thread. Similarly to Snow White's tale, the old woman was the evil fairy in disguise. Fate took over and Sleeping Beauty ended up pricking her finger on the spindle and falling into a deep sleep. The damsel in distress, asleep in her own castle, was to be rescued by a prince who could cut through the vines that surround the castle, and fight off the evil to make sure he would get his prize, the princess. Seth Lerer would most likely agree that the princess's dangerous situation is one that would only be resolved with the help of a man, which further emphasizes the need for male authority in this time period. There were many men who tried to overcome the terrors that surrounded the princess's castle, and it ended up being a contest to see who could survive to rescue the princess. The fact that marrying the princess is the end prize in "Sleeping Beauty" shows how heavily marriage was the duty of the man seeking out the woman in the 1890s.

The final story presented in *Three Fairy Princesses* is the rags-to-riches tale of Cinderella. She is banished to a life of cleaning house under the direction of her evil step-mother. Cinderella was not allowed to attend the King's ball, which she was so distraught over. A fairy-godmother paid Cinderella a visit, gave her the most beautiful gown and carriage to attend the ball, and made her so beautiful that nobody would even recognize her. Cinderella could attend the ball under one condition: that she leave before midnight; otherwise the spells would disappear. Cinderella is dressed so extravagantly that the prince was enamored and danced with her for the rest of the evening. This instance heavily emphasizes the importance of female

beauty, because if Cinderella were not dressed as beautifully, she might not have gotten the prince's attention. The idea of Cinderella being so radiant with the addition of the beautiful gown and carriage also emphasizes material things, and how these can act as a façade for happiness.

Cinderella was invited to another night of dancing at the castle, this time to only show up even more beautifully dressed with adornments of jewels and glass slippers. The famous glass slipper left behind from that night is a metaphor for so many things. Cinderella was in a hurry to get out of the ball before midnight so the prince would not see her in her rags, which ultimately places more emphasis on beauty and appearance. The story is basically saying that presently the prince would not be as attracted to Cinderella if she were in her cinder-colored rags and her makeup and hair undone. It also may show Cinderella's eagerness to keep her true identity hidden because in reality, she is a house-servant and there would otherwise be no need for the prince to see her. The slipper in itself may also be a metaphor for sexual desire, as Seth Lerer describes. Lerer describes female protagonists of fairy tales as "sexually vulnerable" and the "body of the girl becomes the subject" (Lerer 231) of the fairy tale. This is a rather interesting connection because often in fairy tales, there are particular instances in which a female would give some sort of trinket, whether it is a handkerchief or a lock of one's hair, to her lover to signify that they are together. This may be a subtle attempt of Cinderella to leave a piece of her with the prince. It just so happens that the forgotten slipper is helpful when the prince is searching for the lovely lady he met at the ball. The slipper ultimately brought the two together in a romantic way, which signifies how the slipper played a huge role in the outcome of the story.

All in all, the stereotypes presented in *Three Fairy Princesses* reflect the manner in which females were supposed to behave in the 1890s. Even though this compilation of fairy tales was written by a female author, it is rather convincing that women are generally naïve beings and should learn from the mistakes of the princesses. What Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella all have in common is that they needed a handsome prince to rescue them from themselves. Their own naivety was putting them in harm's way, but the prince would save them forever from their own inexperience. This shows young readers that society places a greater emphasis on the man coming to whisk away his princess and improving her life in nearly every aspect, whereas if a princess is left to herself she can get herself into a lot of trouble.

A commonality among the three princess stories is that females are generally portrayed as the antagonist. These antagonistic characters reflect all types of downfalls such as wrath, envy, and the desire to murder another human being. The most striking and obvious of these is envy and how each evil woman in these stories stops at nothing to ensure that she is vindicated. In "Snow White" and "Cinderella" an evil step-mother seems to control the fate of her husband's children from a previous marriage. This not only illustrates how important the role of the mother was in rearing the children of the household, but it also shows how absent the father was from family life. The reader cannot help but wonder if the father knows these nonsensical shunnings and murder attempts are going on, or if the father is simply too busy to notice or care. It is evident that society in the 1890s put a heavy influence on the roles of mothers in raising their children, which is nearly identical to what present-day society believes as well. Some aspects of society, especially those aspects depicted in literature, are constant no matter what time period the story is taking place in.

Contrary to popular narration of these stories in today's society, the author does not mention any instances of kissing between the prince and princesses. Being awakened or saved by "true love's kiss" is nothing *Three Fairy Princesses* hints at, which is another interesting component of this text. While the older edition of these fairy tales assumes a more conservative approach in terms of kissing, it is hard to question why these changes were made in the more modern versions. This may reflect modern society's need to spice things up, as if old-fashioned romance was simply a thing of the past. Also, Seth Lerer would agree in the sense that the women of fairy tales provide a sense of "illicit sexuality" (Lerer 230) about them. That being said, there must be something alluring about a damsel in distress to a handsome prince who would put in that much effort to save her from her slumber. Each one of these stories ends in a way where the prince takes the princess to be his wife, which is the ultimate prized possession. The princesses are treated as objects that can be saved, as if it were a competition to get the princess to be their wife first. The apple, spindle, and glass slipper bring the tales of these three princesses together by illustrating the naivety and materialism of these young women, who all present valuable lessons to their readers.

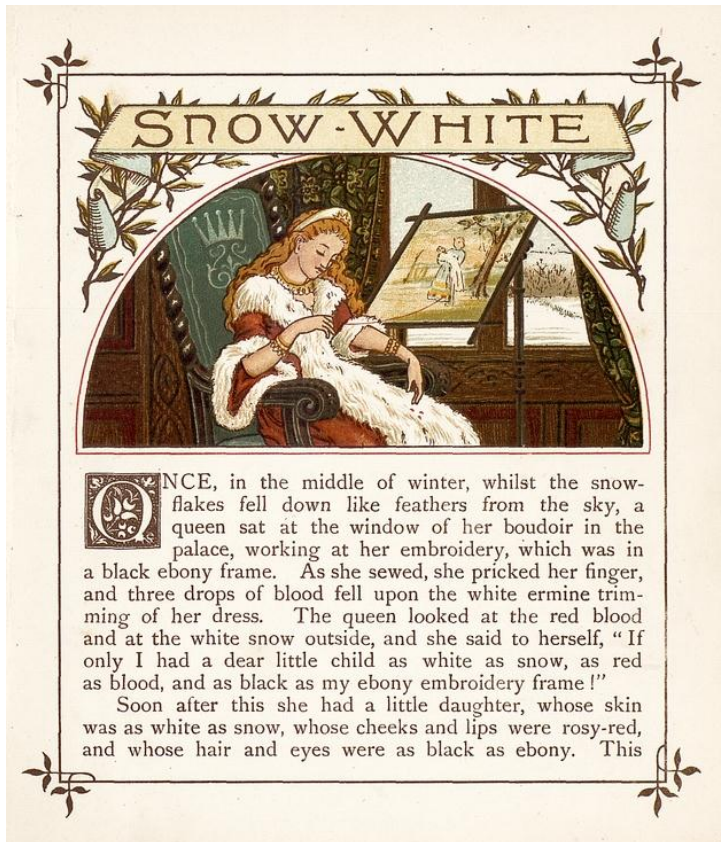
Patterson's work in *Three Fairy Princesses* emphasizes the gender roles and stereotypes of the 1890s with respect to the nature of fairy tales themselves. The women presented in these stories are shown as generally naïve, helpless, and doomed lasses until a hero comes to rescue them from their demise. These stories ultimately contained messages that girls would internalize, thus contributing to the overall importance of keeping strict gender roles in this time period. These fairy tales have survived through years of telling these stories and passing

them down, the overall messages remain the same, and the tales are still relevant in today's society.

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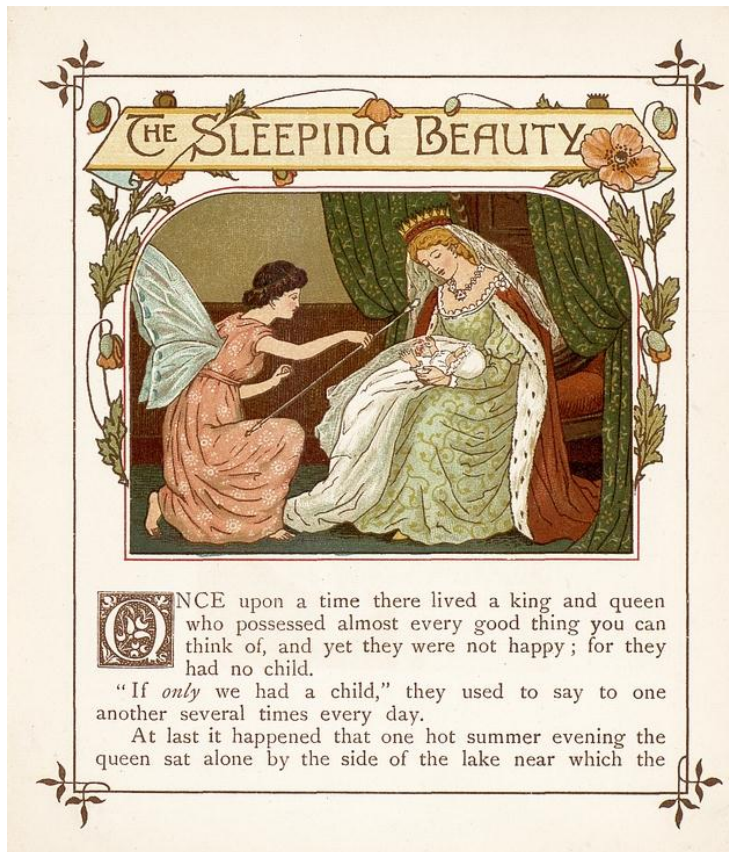
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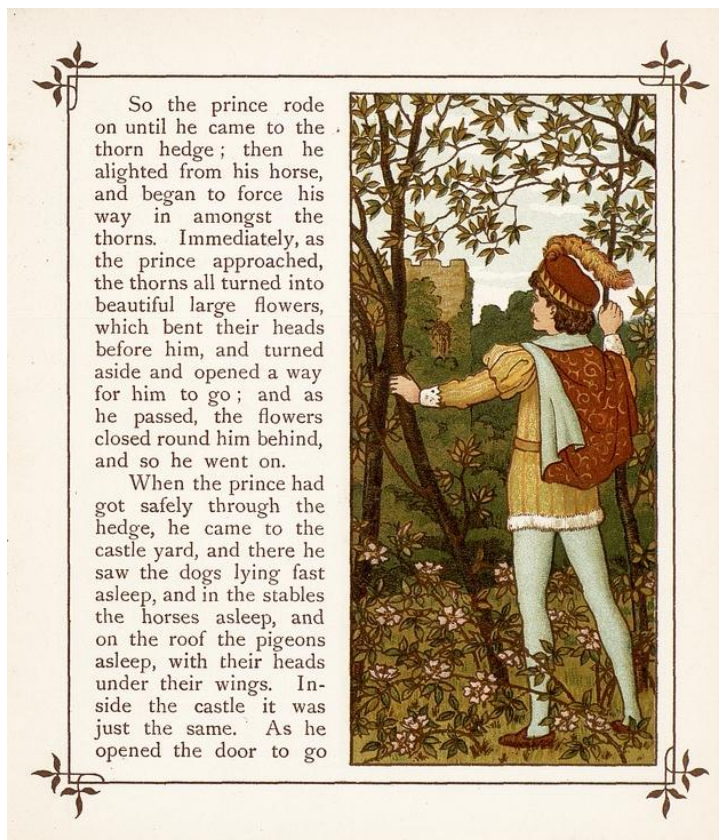


QNCE, in the middle of winter, whilst the snow-flakes fell down like feathers from the sky, a queen sat at the window of her boudoir in the palace, working at her embroidery, which was in a black ebony frame. As she sewed, she pricked her finger, and three drops of blood fell upon the white ermine trimming of her dress. The queen looked at the red blood and at the white snow outside, and she said to herself, "If only I had a dear little child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as my ebony embroidery frame!"

Soon after this she had a little daughter, whose skin was as white as snow, whose cheeks and lips were rosy-red, and whose hair and eyes were as black as ebony. This



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in, he saw at once that even the flies were asleep on the walls, and everything was so still, he could hear himself breathing as he walked. He passed through the kitchens first, and there he saw the cook with her hand raised ready to box the scullion's ears. In the hall and the state-rooms the courtiers were all fast asleep, sitting or standing just in the same place that they were in one hundred years ago, when the magic sleep fell upon them. The king and the queen still slept upon their thrones. The prince walked on—it was like passing through some place of death—and at last he came to the winding turret-staircase; he went up round and round to the very top, and came to the wooden



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CINDERELLA



THERE was once a rich man who had a very good woman for his wife; he had also one little daughter. When the child was still young, the wife was taken ill; and as she felt that she was about to die, she called her little daughter to her, and said, "Dear child, be good and pious all your life, and you will be protected and happy." After saying this, she died.

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